



## Education Program

Postsecondary Remedial Education

### Overview

According to a 1996 study by the The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), over 25% of all students entering college needed remedial education, or courses that raise a student's general competency to the minimum required levels in the subject areas determined by a college or university. In some states, as many as 50 percent of high school graduates needed remediation in their first year of postsecondary work. This comprehensive study was designed to provide current national estimates of the extent of remediation on college campuses. NCES collected data in fall 1995 from 2-year and 4-year higher education institutions and concluded:

- About 47 percent of institutions offering remedial courses indicated that the number of students enrolled in remedial courses at their institution had stayed about the same in the last 5 years; 39 percent said enrollments had increased; and 14 percent said they had decreased.
- About 60 percent of institutions determined which students needed remedial coursework by administering placement examinations to all entering students.
- About one-third of institutions offering remedial courses reported that there were state policies or laws that affected the remedial offerings of their institution, most often requiring or encouraging institutions to offer remedial education.
- About 25 percent of institutions reported that there was a limit on the length of time a student may take remedial courses. Institutional policy set these time limits on remediation at 75 percent of the institutions, and state policy or law set the time limits at 21 percent of the institutions.

The release of such statistics has caused an increased interest in state legislatures on education reform specifically surrounding the cost, access and public perception of remedial education.

These statistics raise several complicated issues for state legislatures:

- How do states determine which students need remediation?
- Why are so many students not prepared for postsecondary education?
- How do states reduce the amount of remediation that students require when entering postsecondary institutions?
- Who pays for remediation?

The financial burden of high remedial education rates at postsecondary institutions typically falls on the state and the colleges and universities. Many resent that the state must pay for remedial coursework at the college level when the assumption is that the state already paid for this while the student was in high school and should have gained the necessary skills to succeed while enrolled in the K-12 system. The issues of adequacy and equity of K-12 education, as well as access to postsecondary education also are driving the policy debate. Restricting the amount of remediation offered at postsecondary institutions can limit access to college, primarily for economically disadvantaged or minority children who may not have had adequate opportunities at the K-12 level to prepare for college.

### Legislation and Legislative Trends

#### *Determining which Students Need Remediation*

As state legislatures become more involved in setting the minimum competency standards for high school graduates, they are interested in determining whether they have met their goal of increasing student performance. This includes ensuring that the established standards are aligned with the placement requirements of institutions of higher education because when students meet the K-12 requirements and still are in need of remedial education at the postsecondary level, legislators begin to ask why.

Our research indicates that most placement policies currently are not established by state statute. Only four states - **Colorado, Florida, Texas and West Virginia** - have a state law that requires a placement exam for entering freshman, and only **Florida and Texas** require a specific placement test to determine whether a student is prepared for college-level work. **California** is considering a measure that would require the California State University "...to offer to all high school pupils who have completed the tenth grade the opportunity two times each year to take the Entry Level Mathematics Examination and the English Placement Test which were developed for use by entering first students of the California State University." Under this bill, the university would be required to report the results to the pupils so they might have an opportunity to seek remediation before they enter college, if necessary.

States employ varying approaches to determining which students need remediation upon entering postsecondary institutions. High school exit examinations are one method. Twenty-eight states and **Puerto Rico** administer exit examinations. Of these 28 states, 12 use the data collected to determine either the student's need for remediation or the level of funding and efforts applied toward remedial education.

According to a 1997 study by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), at least seven states - **Georgia, New York, Nevada, Arkansas, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and West Virginia** - have statewide policies that determine how all freshmen in public postsecondary institutions are assessed and placed appropriately in their first year. In some states, these comprehensive policies cover mathematics, reading, and English preparation, and in others, they cover math and English. **Illinois** and **Virginia**, for example, have state policies that require postsecondary institutions to conduct assessment and determine placement, instead of the assessment and placement occurring at the state level. Finally, in other states, including **Kansas, Montana, Nebraska** and **North Dakota**, placement methods vary by institution as the states have not set a common policy to determine remediation efforts.

#### *Causes of High Remediation Rates*

There are several theories as to why remediation rates are high. According to an analysis of several member states of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), students needing remediation may be those who did not attend college immediately following high school and may need refresher courses. Other students needing remediation might be those who did not enroll in a college preparatory curriculum in high school, avoided specific college preparatory classes needed to perform at the expected level of competence, did not successfully complete college preparatory coursework, or completed a weak curriculum.

A broader issue that leads to higher remediation rates is the disjuncture between the K-12 education system and postsecondary institutions. Students often receive mixed signals about expectations and requirements because the two systems are not aligned. For instance, a student may complete all the requirements and meet all the standards to graduate from high school, including passing an exit examination. However, upon entering a postsecondary institution, she then finds herself taking remedial courses because the skills and knowledge required by the high school was inconsistent with what the university expected for demonstrated competency in various subject areas. Colleges and universities have many different placement exams that students know little or nothing about, and although a student's grades may meet the university admissions criteria, the level of competency demonstrated on the placement exams may dictate enrollment in remedial courses.

#### *Lowering Remediation Rates*

Most policymakers agree that postsecondary remedial education rates are too high. However, they do not necessarily agree on the appropriate method for reducing these levels. One approach is to set restrictions on how requirements be met. Currently, only four states - **Colorado, Florida, Nebraska** and **Texas** - have state laws that restrict how students may satisfy remedial education requirements. For example, under legislation signed into law in the 2000 session, students in **Colorado** must take basic skills remedial coursework no later than the end of their freshman year and only from specified schools (i.e. Adams State College, Mesa State College, or any local community college). In **Texas**, however, a student must retake the Texas Academic Skills Program Test to demonstrate competency or receive a "B" or better in a freshman-level credit course in the subject of deficiency before he or she may enroll in any upper division courses.

#### *Accountability*

State legislatures are focusing more on higher education accountability, specifically regarding remediation, as education reform sweeps through the K-12 system. Accountability takes different forms in different states. For example, some states require institutions to report rates of remediation, have established performance indicators, or have instituted financial incentives to lower the rates of remedial education.

Laws in at least 17 states - **Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia** - include provisions for public reporting of data regarding entering students who need remediation. For example, **Colorado** now requires the State Board of Community Colleges and Occupational Education, local community colleges, Adams State College and Mesa State College to track all students who are enrolled in basic skills courses to determine whether those students successfully graduate; compile data regarding student performance; report the school districts from which the student graduated; trace the number of students graduating from each school district; and provide information about the basic skills for which the students require remediation. The Colorado Commission on Higher Education then must report cost and student data to the legislature.

At least ten states - **Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia** - have state laws that include provisions for institution performance indicators that include goals for reducing remedial education. For example, colleges and universities in Washington are required to provide information to school districts about recent graduates who enroll in precollege classes, and state statute explicitly encourages institutions of higher education and school districts to "work together to solve problems of common concern."

In response to the number of students needing remediation upon entering postsecondary institutions, states have begun examining ways to increase student competency and decrease the amount of remedial education that students need. At least three states - **Arkansas, Florida** and **Louisiana** - have state laws that include provisions for financial incentives for institutions to reduce remedial

education. However, since cost is one of the driving factors beyond the increased attention to remedial education, several states have devised cost schemes to create disincentives for unsuccessful completion of remedial education coursework. During the 1999 and 2000 legislative sessions, state legislators in at least five states - **Alaska, California, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Washington** - introduced legislation that created alternatives for funding remedial education coursework. Other examples include:

- Arkansas created the Academic Challenge Scholarship program in 1991. This scholarship is awarded to students who complete the college preparatory program in high school with a "C" average, and it covers tuition and fees at Arkansas' public colleges and universities. Since the scholarship program was implemented, the percentage of high school graduates needing one or more remediation courses dropped over 10 percent.
- In 1997, the Secondary and Higher Education Remediation Advisory Commission (SHERAC) of **Ohio** unveiled a plan to improve college readiness. One component of the plan is to expand The Early English Composition Assessment Program to include intervention strategies targeted to "at risk" high school students who will need remediation in writing at the collegiate level. Second, the plan expands the Early Mathematics Placement Testing Program to include the professional development of high school mathematics teachers.
- In 2000, **Kentucky** passed House Bill 178 establishing the Kentucky Early Mathematics Testing Program. This program provides information to high school sophomores and juniors regarding their level of mathematics knowledge in relation to college standards to encourage students to take additional high school mathematics courses and reduce the number of students needing mathematics remediation in college.

#### *Cost of Remediation*

In recent years, states have become concerned over the extent of remediation and the cost of providing it. As a result, states have encouraged their public universities to no longer offer remedial education, to restrict the amount of allowable remediation, to move the responsibility to community and junior colleges, or to institute a combination of these approaches. At least three states - **Arkansas, Florida and Louisiana** - have state laws that include provisions for financial incentives for institutions to reduce remedial education. Currently, seven states have passed legislation restricting or eliminating remedial programs at four-year institutions. The following are some specific examples of state action:

- New Mexico and **South Carolina** prohibit state funding for remediation at doctoral institutions;
- Massachusetts allows only a maximum percentage of university freshmen to be enrolled in remedial education classes;
- Arkansas placed a statutory cap on the use of state funds for remediation at its public universities;
- Colorado, **Florida** and **South Carolina** only offer remedial education at two-year college institutions. Likewise, funding for remediation is awarded to only these institutions.

#### **NCSL Publications**

Demarée K. Michelau. "Trends in Postsecondary Remedial Education Policy." NCSL State Legislative Report Vol.25, No.6. Denver, CO: National Conference of State Legislatures, July 2000.

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